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Gerhard R. Kaiser, ed. *Deutsche Berichte aus Paris, 1789-1933: Zeiterfahrung in der Stadt der Städte*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017. 549 pp. €29.90. (cl). ISBN 978-3835330184.

Review by Laird Easton, California State University, Chico.

This book of German reportage on Paris is even larger than its 549 pages when one takes its miniscule font size into account. Despite the eyestrain induced by this editorial decision, the anthology offers a rich and often entertaining portrait of Paris, as observed by Germans, Austrians, and Swiss visitors, from the eve of the French Revolution to the beginning of the Third Reich. The editor has chosen only non-fiction accounts that were published independently but this still leaves room for a wide variety of forms, from correspondence to portraits, essays, and editorials. Alongside now obscure journalists one finds such famous names as Börne, Ruge, Brentano, Nordau, Herzl, Meier-Graefe, Schickele, Roth, Mann, Sternheim, Tucholsky, Kracauer, and Benjamin. For obvious reasons the authors are overwhelmingly male but where he could, the editor included some sharp-eyed female observers, including, Johanna Schopenhauer, Fanny Lewald, Ida von Hahn-Hahn, and Annette Kolb.

The time frame emphasizes the role of Paris as “the capital of the nineteenth century,” as the laboratory of the future where German speakers could experience social forms, political developments, and technical innovations that would eventually reach Central Europe. Of course there were antecedents to this view of Paris before 1789 but clearly it was the Revolution that firmly implanted the French capital in the mind of German speakers as the font of the future. After 1871 one perceives a slight displacement in the position of Paris as the most important theater of modernity, although in many aspects, technical and artistic, she still retained her claim to the appellation mentioned in the book’s title: “city of cities.” After 1914, when Berlin and New York have clearly outstripped her as modernist icons, elements of nostalgia for the old Paris enter into the reportage. With the advent of the Nazi regime all interesting reportage on Paris ceases obviously and by the postwar period Paris—despite the allure of existentialism—has clearly lost its unique role, becoming just one more attractive European city with an interesting past. So the book describes a rise and fall a powerful trope in the imaginary of German speakers.

In his introduction the editor highlights *Zeiterfahrung*, the way German-speaking visitors experienced an accelerated tempo of life in Paris. This is certainly a salient and unifying theme throughout much of the book. It is striking to note how many visitors adumbrate the ideas of Georg Simmel’s *The Metropolis and Modern Life*. As early as 1798 a traveler noted, “Gestern und vorgestern war es mir unmöglich mich zu sammeln; alle meine Sinnen hatten sich in den Augen konzentriert; die große Menge der neuen Gegenstände, das Gerassel der Wagen, das Durcheinanderlaufen der Menge, und die Thätigkeit, die eine jeden hier zu beleben scheint, ließen mir nicht einen Augenblick Zeit zum Überlegen. Ich war eine bloße Maschine, die sehen und hören, aber nicht zu denken und die empfangenen Eindrücke zu ordnen vermöchte” (p. 34). One could experience this sensual overload as disorienting or intoxicating; in any case, as Martin Deutinger wrote in a particularly compelling piece, the Parisians certainly required a completely different nervous system from everyone else to process it, just to remain sufficiently vigilant to avoid being crushed by a carriage (p. 200). As did many German visitors, Deutinger remarked how

relentless commercial competition compelled Parisian businesses to develop a high degree of specialization, to constantly seek out and emphasize the new. What distinguishes Paris from all other cities is not the sensual overload, or the constant novelty per se—these are the qualities that characterize urban modernity everywhere—but their extreme development: “In dieser Hinsicht kann Paris wieder *allein* als Stadt bezeichnet werden; alle andere sind, was diese allseitige städtische Thätigkeit anbelangt, nur einzelne in der Welt zerstreute Fragmente, Theil einer Stadt, oder entlegene Vorstädte, aber keine ganze, rechte Stadt im vollen Sinne des Wortes” (p. 202). Börne has a lovely phrase to describe the perception of Paris as a site where one encountered a curious temporal disorientation: “Paris ist der Telegraph der Vergangenheit, das Mikroskop der Gegenwart und das Fernrohr der Zukunft” (p. 109).

A related theme that pervades the reportage at least until the beginning of the twentieth century is Paris as the home of revolution. German-speaking visitors were constantly on the *qui vive* for signs of yet another political convulsion emanating from the popular quarters of the city, keenly aware that when their neighbor sneezed, they often would catch the cold. By and large the middle-class visitors share an anxiety about the prospect of revolution. Adolph Helfferich, for example, a witness to the June 1848 revolt, predicted that the government would fire upon the workers because it must (p. 189). On the same occasion another observer repeated the rumor that insurgent women had cannibalized the corpses of government soldiers (p. 198). There are some who report sympathetically on the left: Georg Förster, for example, or Arnold Ruge. In the aftermath of the crushing of the Paris Commune, Ludwig Pfau, touring the city, disputed the belief that the Communards had laid waste large parts of the city, adding that unfortunately the rumors of atrocities on the part of the Versailles government do not seem to have been also exaggerated (p. 263). The same author had predicted earlier the demise of the Second Empire in the wake of the collapse of Napoleon III’s Mexican adventure, an example of the shrewd reporting one often finds in this volume (pp. 249-250). After the solidification of the Third Republic, German interest in Parisian politics diminishes perceptibly.

German visitors were as much struck by the social freedom that seemed to characterize Parisian life as by the issue of political freedom. Whether it is a matter of Parisians feeling free to dress and eat as they choose without fear of insult or giving offence (p. 31) or the *carrière ouverte aux talents* found in the revolutionary armies (p. 37) or the relatively egalitarian interaction of different social classes (p. 154), Parisians seemed to German observers to enjoy a degree of personal freedom unimaginable anywhere in Central Europe. This freedom pertained especially to relations between the genders. Whether shocked or titillated or just curious, Germans often remarked on the looser sexual mores that apparently prevailed in the French capital. Observing the so-called *Étonnantes* of 1798, Georg Rebmann assured his readers that he did not exaggerate when he said that these women clothed themselves in flesh-colored stockings or linen so thin “daß viele Freudenmädchen im Palais Egalite sich schämen würden, so zu erscheinen” (p. 50). A half century later, however, Ludwig Kalisch praised the famous *grisettes*, consorts of the university students, for their good nature and their selfless devotion to their lovers (pp. 202-203). A few years later another visitor noted that although the state had not yet formally declared women to be equal to men, society had long ago decreed this: “Das Weib ist hier emancipiert im schönsten Sinne des Wortes und deshalb hat die Emancipation hier auch nicht jene lächerlichen Auswüchse, mit welchen sie in den übrigen Staaten gestraft ist” (p. 228). Partly, he goes on, this was due to the cumbersome and laborious way German households were run compared to the streamlined operation of the typical Parisian home.

Some of the most interesting observations concern the leading role of Paris as a center for the arts and sciences, as well as for the humane treatment of the blind, deaf, and mentally ill. In this category one finds a description of a school for blind children employing a system of writing anticipating Braille’s invention only a few years later (pp. 86-87), of the *Bureau Universel des Sciences et de l’Industrie*, a library for scholars that subscribed to nearly every journal from every country with evening gatherings for researchers to meet each other and exchange ideas (pp. 107-108), of the advanced instruction methods in the *École Polytechnique* (pp. 100-102) as well as in the *École royale et spéciale de dessin et de mathématiques, appliquée aux arts industriels* (pp. 216-218). Paris, wrote one enthusiast, is not only the capital of France

but should be considered the capital of the entire educated world (p. 153). One notices in these remarks the legacy of the cultural decentralization of the German-speaking world: no German city could offer the same array of cultural institutions until the eventual rise of Berlin.

Germans expressed astonishment at the pace of commercial and technical innovation. Ludwig Börne expressed a common theme when he noted the ubiquity of shops with their elaborate advertising painted over their entire facades, paintings that could be in the Louvre, he asserted (p. 110). The truly colossal mail-order enterprise of the Bon Marché reads like a description of a nineteenth-century analog to Amazon (pp. 313-316). The technological marvels of the world's fair of 1878 led an observer to predict that mechanization will eventually replace entirely human labor (p. 277). Describing the new department stores Clara Schreiber sees them portending the end of small retail (p. 302). Of course a tour of the famous sewers that make Paris not only a healthy city, but "zweifelloos die gesündeste Großstadt der Welt" is not lacking (p. 307). Haussmann's vast urban reconstruction evokes frequent commentary. Its anti-insurrectional function is explained (pp. 237-238) and its great expense deplored, but in general it receives enthusiastic praise for its accomplishments, for keeping Paris at the forefront of urban modernity (pp. 241-243). The art critic Julius Meier-Graefe, praised the modern iron construction of the Pont Alexandre III and the Eiffel Tower, while regretting the retrograde ornament on the former (pp. 325-327). On the eve of the First World War another art critic, Karl Scheffler, extolled the graceful monumentality of Paris, its architectonic majesty, both princely and democratic. As so often in these reports the critique of conditions back home is explicit: "Wenn wir in Städten wie Berlin uns gewöhnen müssen, in den langen Straßen, außer den irritierenden Verkürzungen der Seitenfronten nichts zu sehen, als am Ende ein graues, staubiges Nebel nichts....so bietet Paris uns auf Schritt und Tritt den Genuß Dessen, was man Perspektivepoesie nennen könnte" (pp. 348-349).

Not all the reportage is favorable. Astonishment at the pace of life often goes hand in hand with the fear that this will obliterate any genuine human contact. There is a persistent thread of more or less subtle critique of French public life as too superficial or too feminized. The corruption of the Third Republic comes under scrutiny (pp. 298-300) as does its continual ministerial roundelay (pp. 316-318). Some Germans deplore the colonization of Paris by vulgar Americans (pp. 307-308, 385-387, 399-400). But by and large the book pays tribute to the enduring German fascination with Paris during the long nineteenth-century and through the 1920s. It is perhaps ironic that--after serving for so long as an icon of modernity in the German imagination--Paris and the Parisians should be praised in one of the last pieces in the book, a lovely observation by Walter Benjamin, for their essentially conservative social forms (pp. 401-402). Gerhard Kaiser is to be congratulated on assembling such varied and uniformly interesting reports on 'the city of cities.'

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